

Indian 'miracle lake' becomes pilgrim destination

May 25 2010, by Sailendra Sil

A dried-up and polluted lake in eastern India has become a major pilgrimage site attracting thousands of people a day after claims that its mud cures cancer and other diseases.

At the lake in Nakali village, 70 kilometres (45 miles) south of Kolkata, families smear each other in the dark, gluey "miracle mud", defying government attempts to prevent the site becoming a religious attraction.

Each Tuesday and Saturday -- auspicious days for Bengalis -- large crowds of devotees who have travelled from across the region gather before dawn to completely immerse themselves in the sludge at the bottom of the small lake.

"They arrive overnight in trucks, chartered buses and trains from different parts of the state," Suman Mondal, a 28-year-old selling lemon water to the mainly Hindu pilgrims, told AFP.

"People are not only bathing and covering their body and hair with mud, they are drinking water and taking mud from the [pond](#) as well. It's a miracle pond."

Kanti Ganguly, the West Bengal state minister for the Sunderbans region, said the government wanted to end the increasingly popular pilgrimage.

"People started to throng to the pond for a bathe after a rumour did the

rounds of local villages last year that a man was cured of [liver cancer](#) by taking dips," he said.

"Authorities have imposed a ban on gathering in and around the pond as its waters are so polluted that drinking the water or taking a bathe could be unhealthy."

Ganguly said policemen had been stationed around the lake but people poured in nonetheless. "We can't hurt their faith," he said.

The phenomenon has continued to grow even though the "cured" man has now died. He was a member of the family that owns the [lake](#).

"It all started after my brother, Hiranmoy, had a dream about a snake goddess telling him that a dip in the pond could produce miracle cures of killer diseases," Tarini Raj, 45, said.

"He was cured of cancer for a while, but later died."

Raj pointed to rows of images of snake goddesses beside the pond, offered by those who believed they had been cured of their diseases.

"It's a ritual to offer prayers to the snake goddess," he said. "Those who come are mainly poor people suffering from chronic ailments. The number is nearly half a million but now on the wane because of the summer heat."

Some say the family is motivated by the money it collects from food and drink stalls that serve pilgrims, but devotees like Biswajit Halder, 56, are in no doubt about the pond's curative powers.

"We are not bothered what the government says. My wife was suffering from throat cancer for over two years. She is now better after smearing

her body with mud of the pond," he said, sitting in the knee-deep mire.

Bathing in sacred water plays a central part in the Hindu religion, with many believing a dip in the holy Ganges river can cure diseases as well as wash away sin and break the cycle of life and rebirth.

Tens of millions of people bathed in the Ganges during the Kumbh Mela festival in northern India which finished last month after 104 days that were seen as especially auspicious.

But not all Indians subscribe to such beliefs. Prabir Ghosh, general secretary of the Kolkata-based Science and Rationalist Association of India, has been campaigning against the Nakali lake's sudden rise to religious prominence.

"It's just a superstition. Authorities should deal with such a thing. This stinking pond is only a health hazard," he told AFP.

Ghosh said some rationalist campaigners had been beaten up when they went to the pond to express their views.

"But we are not scared, we will continue our campaign against this false belief," he vowed.

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